The 2011 Protests in Inner Mongolia: An Ethno-environmental Perspective

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Abstract

In May 2011, Inner Mongolia experienced the most serious ethnic unrest in the region for 30 years. In this article, I explore the broader context that led to the eruption of the protests, with a particular emphasis on environmental issues. My aim is to explain why environmental issues occupied such a prominent position in the protests, and how these issues were connected to ethnicity. After discussing the material and practical implications of grassland degradation for Mongolian herders, I analyse the symbolic implications of this environmental crisis for the Mongolian educated elite, who have linked environmental issues to ethnic politics and identity. I argue that in the last 20 years or so, Mongolian intellectuals have developed a highly ethnicized environmental discourse, and that this discourse played an important role in informing the 2011 protests. My analysis focuses on this discourse as it is manifested in the domains of art, academia and daily discourse.

Keywords: Inner Mongolia; 2011 protests; ethnicity; environment; grassland degradation

In May 2011, a surge of unrest swept through Inner Mongolia, one of China's largest ethnic autonomous regions, as thousands of ethnic Mongols, mostly students and herders, took to the streets in several towns and cities. The protests lasted for more than a week and proved to be the most serious ethnic unrest that the region had witnessed in 30 years. They were sparked by the death, on 10 May, of a Mongolian herder called Mergen, who was killed by a coal truck driven by a Han Chinese driver. The incident took place near the city of Shilinhot (*Xilinhaote* 锡林浩特), the administrative centre of Shilingol League (*Xilinguole* 锡林郭勒) in central Inner Mongolia, when Mergen, together with a group of fellow herders, tried to block a convoy of coal trucks to prevent them from passing through their grazing land.[1]

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1 Jacobs 2011a; Martin 2011; RFA. 2011. "Inner Mongolia in 'war-like state'," 5 June, http://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/military-06052011183520.html. Accessed 22 September 2014; RFA 2011; Watts 2011; Yu, Verna, and Laura Zhou. 2011. "Police in Inner Mongolia on high alert over planned protests," *South China Morning Post*, 31 May.

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Mergen's death, however, was only the trigger for the protests which had much deeper roots and revealed the persistence of old inter-ethnic tensions in the region. Indeed, during the protests, the demonstrators and other local residents who were interviewed by the media expressed various grievances and presented demands that addressed a wide range of issues. However, one theme that clearly dominated the public rhetoric of the 2011 protests was the severe damage caused in recent years to the local grasslands by the region's booming coal mining industry.[2] In addition to many oral references by protesters and other Mongols to the "destruction of the grasslands," the environmental theme was also manifested in banners that carried the slogan: "Protect our/the grasslands."[3] It also dominated the statements that government officials made during the protests to appease the demonstrators, which included promises to close down and punish illegal mines as well as mines that had violated environmental protection laws and caused severe damage to the local grasslands.[4]

Despite their scale, and in contrast to the ethnic unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang in 2008 and 2009, the Inner Mongolian protests have received surprisingly little scholarly attention. In this article, I hope to amend this situation by examining why environmental issues occupied such a prominent position in the protests and how these issues were connected to Mongolian ethnic-nationalism. Over the last two decades, much has been written about grassland degradation in Inner Mongolia, the environmental policies that were implemented to combat this degradation, and the impact that both have had on the material condition and lifestyle of Mongolian herders.[5] Yet, in contrast, very little attention has been paid to the more symbolic and political aspects of the environmental crisis and its impact on Mongolian intellectuals, for whom this crisis has been mainly related to ethnic politics.

There are some indications that Mongolian intellectuals played an active role in the 2011 protests. This is evident in the fact that, in addition to herders and ordinary residents, among those who were arrested during the protests were also students, high school teachers and college professors. Some of the latter group were specifically accused of posting provocative messages on the internet and of actively encouraging their fellow Mongols to take to the streets via text messages.[6] More importantly, however, I argue that, over the course of at least two decades, it is Mongolian intellectuals who have shaped the

2 BBC Zhongwen wang 2011; Jacobs 2011b; RFA 2011; Martin 2011; Watts 2011; Yang, Ming. 2011. "Zhongguo NeiMeng baofa 30 nian zui da guimo kangyi huodong" (The largest scale protest in the last 30 years erupted in Inner Mongolia, China), VOA Meiguo zhi yin (Voice of America in Chinese), 24 May, http://www.voachinese.com/articleprintview/782229.html. Accessed 26 August 2014.

3 Jacobs 2011a.

4 BBC Zhongwen wang 2011; China.org.cn. 2011. "China to limit development projects in Inner Mongolia," 4 June, http://www.china.org.cn/environment/2011-06/04/content_22715913.htm. Accessed 12 August 2014; Martin 2011; Watts 2011.

5 Williams 1996, 2002; Humphrey and Sneath 1999; Sneath 2000; Li, Wenjun, and Huntsinger 2011.

6 SMHRIC (Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center). 2011. "Many arrested, some fled after protests in Southern Mongolia," 17 June, http://hwww.smhric.org/news. Accessed 27 May 2015; Jacobs 2011b.

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ethno-environmental discourse that dominated the protests. This article examines the formation, content and expressions of this discourse through an analysis of the artistic expressions of Mongolian artists, academic publications by Mongolian scholars and relevant expressions on the internet, as well as conversations and interviews that I have conducted since the early 2000s, in Inner Mongolia and Beijing, with Mongolian artists, writers, officials, academics, students and ordinary people.

Grassland Degradation, the Plight of Mongolian Herders, and Their Symbolic Meaning for Mongolian Intellectuals

Grassland degradation has a long history in Inner Mongolia but has increased drastically in the last three decades, leading the Chinese government to design special environmental policies to protect the grasslands.[7] Based on the assumption that overgrazing has been the main cause of degradation, most of these policies have targeted herders, the majority of whom have always been Mongols.[8] The earliest policies, which began to be implemented in the mid-1980s, included the privatization and fencing of grazing land, and the setting of limits on the size of herds.[9] The degradation of the grasslands, combined with these policies, has had a dramatic impact on the lives of Mongolian herders, limiting their mobility and driving many into poverty.[10]

The policies of the 1980s, however, did not prevent the further deterioration of the Inner Mongolian grasslands.[11] A series of severe sand storms that hit northern China and Beijing in the late 1990s, and which was attributed to this environmental degradation, led the government to draw up a new set of more radical environmental policies. These policies, inaugurated in the early 2000s, focused once again on herders, and included temporary and permanent bans on grazing, as well as the resettlement of herders from degraded grasslands into villages and cities.[12] The new draconian policies dealt another devastating blow to many Mongolian herders, who experienced severe economic loss and physical and cultural displacement. It is estimated that during the early 2000s, hundreds of thousands of Mongolian herders were forced to leave the grasslands, bid farewell to their pastoral lifestyle, and resettle in sedentary settlements where they lived on much lower incomes.[13]

7 Futrell 2007, 57.
8 Longworth and Williamson 1993, 83; Humphrey and Sneath 1999, 44–45; Sneath 2000, 135–36.
9 Longworth and Williamson 1993, 98–100; Williams 1996, 679–681; Humphrey and Sneath 1999, 269–270.
10 Williams 1996, 679–681; 2002, 117–148; Sneath 2000, 157–161; Haishan 2007; Li, Wenjun, Ali and Zhang 2007, 466–68; Li, Xiaoshu 2010; Li, Wenjun, and Huntsinger 2011.
11 Williams 2002, 15, 25; Meyer 2006, 329; Li, Wenjun, and Huntsinger 2011, 1.
12 Yeh 2005, 17–24; Togochog 2006.
13 Borjigin, Gardi. 2005. "Inner Mongolian environment threatened, nomads forced to move," RFA, 7 February, http://www.rfa.org/english/news/social/2005/02/07/nomads/. Accessed 25 April 2007; Togochog 2006; Xun and Bao 2008, especially 123. For more positive assessments of the impact of this resettlement, see Dickinson and Webber 2007.

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If that was not enough, the early 2000s also brought another kind of pressure. Following the launch of the "open up the west" programme (*xibu da kaifa* 西部大开发) in 2000, Inner Mongolia was transformed almost overnight into one of China's most flourishing mining hubs.[14] While this development brought fortune to some,[15] for most Mongolian herders it meant further marginalization, as powerful mining companies, backed by local and often corrupt officials, took over grazing lands, often with minimal or no compensation at all.[16] The development of Inner Mongolia also worsened the plight of many Mongolian herders by accelerating the environmental damage caused to the grasslands, their only source of livelihood and on which they have always depended for survival.[17] The clash between the Mongolian herders and the Han Chinese coal-truck drivers that triggered the 2011 protests occurred against this backdrop and reflected the tensions that had been building up on the grasslands for many years.

While Mongolian herders have been primarily concerned with the practical aspects of Inner Mongolia's grassland degradation and the challenge that this degradation has posed to their livelihood and material survival, for Mongolian intellectuals grassland degradation and the plight of Mongolian herders have had a powerful symbolic meaning. Both issues have been strongly linked to their sense of collective ethnic identity and to ethnic politics. They have also been linked to the long history of Mongolian nationalist struggle against Han Chinese migration to Inner Mongolia, the colonization of Mongolian land, and the concurrent expansion of agriculture, all of which can be traced back to at least the early 20th century.[18]

In the eyes of many educated urban Mongols, the grasslands are a key symbol of Mongolian identity, being a central ingredient of the pastoral culture, livelihoods and spiritual inspiration of the Mongolian people throughout history. The symbolic importance of the grasslands and of pastoralism in general has increased dramatically in recent decades amid the increasing urbanization and sinicization of the Mongolian population, with the sense shared by many Mongols that Mongolian identity is dying out as a result of these processes.[19] Of no lesser importance to the sense of identity of educated urban Mongols are Mongolian herders, whose nomadic way of life has always been tied to the

14 *The Economist* 2012.

15 Woodworth 2011, 13–14; Yan 2012, 76.

16 Chen, Jiqun. 2003. "Dongwuqi caoyuan huanjing dashiji" (A chronicle of major events in the environment of the grassland of East Üjümchin Banner), *Renmin wang*, 18 December, http://www.people.com.cn/GB/huanbao/8220/30473/31026/31028/2253246.html. Accessed 1 December 2013; Chen 2010; Wang 2011a, 2011b; *The Economist* 2012; Xinhuanet.com. 2012. "Bribe-taking Inner Mongolia official jailed for life," 2 July, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-07/02/c_131689837.htm. Accessed 20 November 2013.

17 Liu, Yi. 2003. "Caoyuan, ruhe liuzhu zhe pian lü" (Grassland, how to keep this piece of green), *Renmin ribao*, 4 April; Chen, Stephen. 2010. "Factories turn grasslands into dust bowl," *South China Morning Post*, 14 October; Chen 2010; Ge 2010; Li, Xiaoshu 2010; Yang 2010; Wang 2011a, 2011b; Yan 2012; Greenpeace 2013a, 2013b.

18 Bulag 2004, 86–88, 100–02.

19 Bulag 2000, 184.

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grasslands. Despite the fact that herders today constitute only a small minority of the Mongolian population in China, most of whom shifted to agriculture during the 20th century, they are essential to the preservation of Mongolian identity. They maintain and symbolize the traditional Mongolian pastoral lifestyle, which has always contrasted with the agricultural lifestyle that has historically characterized Han Chinese identity. In addition, they also help today's Mongolian educated elite distinguish themselves from the Han Chinese majority, into which many have recently been assimilated.[20]

I would argue that another major reason that makes Mongolian herders so important symbolically is the fact that they also preserve the Mongolian language, which many educated urban Mongols are no longer able to speak. Moreover, the herders have also been the de facto owners of large areas of the Inner Mongolian grassland. Thus, they have helped to maintain a sense of Mongolian sovereignty in this region despite the fact that over the last century the Mongols have become a small minority in their homeland as a result of the massive migration of millions of Han Chinese to Inner Mongolia.[21]

Considering the important role that the grasslands, herders and pastoralism have played in maintaining Mongolian identity, it is not surprising that in the last two decades or so, as grassland degradation has reached unprecedented levels and as hundreds of thousands of Mongolian herders have been forced to leave the grasslands, the Mongolian educated elite have become even more anxious than before about the very survival of Mongolian identity. This anxiety has been further exacerbated by the increasing numbers of Han Chinese moving to Inner Mongolia during the same period as part of the region's rapid development. As is shown below, in the eyes of many Mongols, grassland degradation and the mass migration of Han Chinese have been inextricably linked, the latter perceived as the prime cause of the former. In this regard, grassland degradation has increased the anxiety of Mongolian intellectuals because it has thrown into bold relief the growing dominance of the Han Chinese in Inner Mongolia and the Mongols' loss of their little remaining sovereignty and control over their homeland and lives.

The death of Mergen triggered the 2011 protests because it contained in a very concentrated form all of the essential ingredients that have led to this anxiety. He was a Mongolian herder killed by a Han Chinese truck driver while trying to protect his grazing land from the encroachment of coal trucks, and as such, he symbolized the victimhood of all Mongols as well as their desperate struggle to protect their land, culture and identity from the Han Chinese who have overwhelmed their homeland. In a similar vein, it is significant that the clash that led to Mergen's death and the main demonstrations in the 2011 protests both took place in Shilingol League. Considering the ecological, demographic and

20 Khan 1996; Bulag 2000, 182–84.

21 Today, Mongols constitute about 17% of Inner Mongolia's population, while the Han account for about 80%.

cultural variations in Inner Mongolia, and the fact that in many parts of this region the lush grasslands have long since disappeared, Shilingol is unique in that, until very recently, it was one of the most purely pastoral parts of Inner Mongolia[22] and thus a symbol of Inner Mongolian pastoral identity.

Grassland Degradation and the Plight of Mongolian Herders in Mongolian Popular Music and Film

In recent years, Inner Mongolia's environmental crisis and its implications for Mongols and Mongolian identity have become a popular theme for Mongolian artists and writers. One of the first Mongolian artists to address these issues was the famous pop and rock musician, Teng Ge'er 腾格尔. Despite his close links to officialdom, Teng Ge'er has been one of the most critical Mongolian artists in present-day China. He was among the first to give voice to the growing anxiety among his fellow Mongolian intellectuals about the destruction of the Inner Mongolian grasslands, the plight of Mongolian herders, and the demise of traditional Mongolian culture and identity.[23]

As early as 1993, Teng Ge'er expressed his strong discontent over the poor state of the grasslands and Mongolian herders in an interview that he gave to a nationally distributed magazine. Referring specifically to his homeland, the Ordos (*E'erduosi* 鄂尔多斯) grassland, he was quoted as saying:

> I can't sing anymore the kind of songs that deceive oneself as well as others, like "The beautiful grassland is my home." My elders and my fellow people will not forgive … In my native land, Ordos grassland, the herding people live year after year in drought and poverty. The lushness of the grassland belongs only to the past.[24]

In this statement, Teng Ge'er not only provided early public testimony about the degree of grassland degradation that was taking place in the Ordos region in south-west Inner Mongolia in the early 1990s, but also linked this environmental crisis with the declining material condition of the local Mongolian herders.[25]

In 1994, shortly after this interview was published, Teng Ge'er released a song called "The land of the blue wolf" (*Cang lang dadi* 苍狼大地), which became the first in a series of environmental protection songs that he created over the course of the last two decades. However, unlike his statement from 1993, Teng Ge'er's focus from this point on has been on the symbolic and cultural implications of grassland degradation rather than the material ones.

"The land of the blue wolf" opens with proud nationalist references to the glorious Mongolian past, but then presents a painful and angry lament about the loss of Mongolian power, the miserable state of Mongolian culture in the present, and the destruction of the Inner Mongolian grasslands:

22 Sneath 2000, vi, 1.
23 Baranovitch 2009.
24 Baranovitch 2001, 359.
25 Baranovitch 2009, 185–190.

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… I heard once that the nomadic people were/the masters of the continent/ … My ruler of former days, where are you now?/ … The steeds have lost their masters/ The hunting dogs have lost their steeds/ The land of the blue wolf is yellow sand/ How lonely is the lush grassland.[26]

"The land of the blue wolf," however, also conveys another message, albeit in a more implicit form. At the very beginning of his song, Teng Ge'er states that the Mongols used to be the masters of the grassland. Then, he describes the loss of Mongolian political power and the demise of Mongolian pastoral culture. Only at the very end of the song does he depict the destruction of the grassland. This progression seems to suggest that the grasslands have turned into desert because the Mongols have lost their political power and are no longer the masters of the grasslands. If one follows this line of interpretation, the implication is that the grasslands have deteriorated to their current poor condition because of their new masters, the Han Chinese and the Chinese state.

My reading of Teng Ge'er's song is consistent with the tendency among Mongolian intellectuals to blame the destruction of the grasslands and Mongolian culture and identity on the Han Chinese and the Chinese state. Echoing the other implicit message in the song, many Mongolian intellectuals also believe that if the Mongols had maintained their political power and traditional culture, the grasslands would have never deteriorated to their current state.

Another powerful artistic expression of the anxiety that many Mongolian intellectuals feel over the destruction of the grasslands and its implications for Mongolian culture and identity appears in the film, *Season of the Horse* (*Jifeng zhong de ma* 季风中的马), which was released in China in 2005. The film was directed by Ning Cai 宁才, a famous Mongolian film actor-turned-director, who also played the leading role in the film, a Mongolian male herder called Urgen.

Spoken almost entirely in Mongolian and shot almost entirely on the grassland, *Season of the Horse* tells the story of the struggle for survival of one Mongolian herding family amid the increasing desertification of the Inner Mongolian grasslands and the various policies that were implemented to combat this desertification. During a lengthy drought, the family lose a large part of their herd and are pushed to the brink. The film depicts the daily hardships that the family experience as their conditions deteriorate, until they are eventually forced to leave the grassland and move to a nearby town in search of work that will enable them to survive. Imbued with a strong tragic tone, the film focuses not only on the material crisis that the family face but also and mainly on the psychological crisis of Urgen, the family's father, who refuses to give up his beloved grassland, loyal old horse, and familiar pastoral lifestyle.

Although the drought in the film is presented as a natural disaster beyond human control, the film nevertheless also contains criticism of the way the government handles the crisis and treats the herders. Indeed, throughout the film the

26 Baranovitch 2009, 188.

government seems quite indifferent to the plight of the Mongolian herders. Even more importantly, the film also suggests, albeit in an implicit way so as to avoid offending any officials who could have banned the film, that governmental policies have actually exacerbated the herders' plight. This message is implied when Urgen's summer grazing land can no longer provide enough grass to feed his small herd, and the herd continues to shrink as more and more sheep starve to death. Urgen plans to move his remaining sheep to his autumn grazing land but then finds out that the government is erecting fences around his pasture and has banned grazing there. This episode is a clear reference to the new policy of placing restrictions on grazing, introduced by the government in the early 2000s, and it clearly aims to illustrate the devastating impact that this policy has had on poor Mongolian herders. Indeed, the film seems to convey the message that by preventing Urgen from grazing his herd on the last available pastureland, the government has actually denied him and his family their only hope of relief and has helped to doom their life on the grasslands.

The following statements, made by Ning Cai at the premiere of his film at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in 2005, shed more light on his artistic intentions:

> The people on the grasslands have been living a nomadic life for centuries – they're a migratory nation … Each season, they move from place to place in search of new pastures. Basically, they move to where the healthy grass is. But now a combination of political and natural developments is taking away their relationship with the land … The Mongolian people are herdsmen – they make a living by herding sheep and cattle. But the Chinese Han people who have been moving into their lands are agriculture-based. They grow grain, corn, wheat and potatoes. This is very bad for the land, because the Mongolian plains aren't suitable for this kind of farming. If you till the soil in Mongolia, you erode it. The great Mongolian plains are now starting to turn into a desert … Nobody used to own the land in Mongolia … You were free to graze your animals where you needed to graze them. Nomadic cultures don't have a culture of land ownership, and don't really understand it. But the lands have now been divided. Each household – each yurt – has been given a limited space to call its own. The horsemen are told to fence off their land, which confuses them. There's no freedom for people to move around anymore. They have to stay put. The government wants people to settle down and stay in one place. I'm not saying that they're deliberately intending to destroy Mongolian culture – they might genuinely think that this is progress for us. But our traditional lifestyle is dying out as a result … The nomads are being forced to give up their traditional way of life and move to the cities … Some of the young people are quite happy. But most of the horsemen are devastated. They don't know how to work there – they're horsemen. It's a very sad situation.[27]

These statements make clear that although *The Season of the Horse* tells the story of one Mongolian herding family, it is actually intended to depict the tragedy of all Mongols amid the dramatic changes that have taken place in Inner Mongolia in recent decades. The statements also offer another powerful example of the symbolic importance of pastoralism, and of herders in particular, to the sense of identity of Mongolian intellectuals, and the anxiety that many of these intellectuals feel about the predicament of their fellow Mongols who live on the grassland. These points are illustrated most vividly in the fact that Ning Cai shifts back

27 Havis, Richard James. 2005. "Plains spoken," *South China Morning Post*, 24 April.

and forth from talking about the herders in the third person and from talking about "their traditional way of life," to talking about "us" and "our" and about "Mongolian culture" in general.

Moreover, whereas in his film Ning Cai avoided addressing the politically sensitive question of who is responsible for the destruction of the Inner Mongolian grasslands and presented it as a natural disaster, his statements, in contrast, spell out the widespread notion among Mongolian intellectuals (which was also hinted at in Teng Ge'er's song) that the main causes of this destruction are the Han Chinese and their culture. As Ning Cai's statements suggest, blaming the Han Chinese for the destruction of the grasslands derives from their association with agriculture and from the widespread belief among Mongols that the introduction of agriculture into Inner Mongolia is the prime cause of the region's grassland degradation. Ning Cai's explanation that agriculture is incompatible with the Mongolian steppe because tilling the soil leads to its erosion is considered conventional wisdom among Mongols, and is a statement I heard repeatedly from several of my Mongolian informants.

Challenging Official Narratives and State Environmental Policies in Academic Publications by Mongolian Scholars

The Mongolian ethno-environmental discourse that is so evident in the artistic work and statements of Teng Ge'er and Ning Cai is also manifested in the academic domain. In the last decade or so, a growing number of Mongolian academicians have started to write extensively on Inner Mongolia's grassland degradation and the plight of Mongolian herders. With their publications and lectures, as well as interviews given to local and national media, these scholars have played a prominent role in shaping, articulating and disseminating the Mongolian ethno-environmental discourse, and in doing so they have also played an important role in challenging the official discourse and policies.

One of the most central arguments promoted by this group of scholars is that, contrary to the official claim, overgrazing is not the prime cause of grassland degradation. In one representative article that was based on a lecture given in 2003, a prominent Mongolian scholar named Dalintai, from Inner Mongolia University, stated explicitly: "In the past we thought that the degradation of the pastureland was caused by overgrazing, but actually it is not."[28] Basing his argument on the conventional wisdom among Mongols, Dalintai attributes grassland degradation to agriculture and the practice of converting natural grassland into cultivated land (*kaiken* 开垦, hereafter "land reclamation"). While many Mongols emphasize the damage caused to the grassland by plowing,[29] Dalintai highlights another factor. He writes that the degradation is "actually … caused by the exploitation

28 Dalintai 2003. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Chinese in this article are by the author.
29 See, e.g., Zhang, Borjigin and Zhang 2007, 21.

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of water resources by agriculture."[30] He then explains that because agriculture requires large quantities of water, a scarce resource in Inner Mongolia, it is responsible for draining much of the surface and ground water in this arid and semi-arid region. It is this rapacious use of water, according to Dalintai, that has led to the drying up of much of the region's natural vegetation and consequent desertification. Elsewhere in his article, Dalintai offers statistical data that relate to the extent of land reclamation and its impact in Inner Mongolia since 1949, claiming that, "70 per cent of the desertification [in Inner Mongolia] has been caused by land reclamation."[31]

As already noted, the notion that land reclamation and agriculture are the main causes of grassland degradation has important implications that relate to ethnicity, because these practices have been associated historically with the Han Chinese. Mongolian scholars are usually careful not to make explicit references to ethnicity, clearly to avoid being blamed for disrupting the unity of nationalities and inciting ethnic unrest. However, references like the one found in Dalintai's essay to the "masses of migrants from outside who entered the grassland,"[32] make it rather clear who should be blamed for the destruction of the grasslands. Moreover, by claiming that land reclamation and agriculture are the main causes of grassland degradation, the Mongolian scholars point an accusing finger not only at the Han Chinese migrants but also at the Chinese state, which has encouraged and sponsored the mass migration of millions of Han Chinese farmers to Inner Mongolia and the massive land reclamation that has taken place in the region since 1949.

Parallel to challenging the hegemonic narrative of overgrazing, Mongolian scholars have also criticized the tendency among officials and Han Chinese scholars to regard nomadic culture as primitive and backward and to promote the sedentarization of Mongolian herders.[33] Contrary to this derogatory, Han-centred view of the traditional Mongolian lifestyle and land use, many Mongolian scholars have emphasized that Mongolian nomadic culture has always existed in harmony with nature and is actually the best means of protecting the grassland and preventing its degradation. In his 2003 article, Dalintai claims that pastoralism forms "a major component of the grassland ecological system,"[34] and then goes on to suggest that:

> We always thought that nomadic culture is backward and primitive. We always wanted to use the so-called advanced things to replace it, like foreign systems or the system of the farmers from the Central Plains. This has caused the disappearance of nomadic culture, which has played the role of protecting the grassland, and then the grassland has turned into desert.[35]

30 Dalintai 2003.
31 Ibid. Dalintai's general argument about *kaiken* has also been made by several Western scholars. See Humphrey and Sneath 1999, 47; Sneath 2000, 135–36.
32 Dalintai 2003.
33 For a discussion of this official view of herders, see Williams 2002, 30–33, 53.
34 Dalintai 2003.
35 Ibid.

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Mongolian scholars point to various factors that make nomadic pastoralism environmentally sustainable, the most important of which is that by constantly moving from place to place, the herders allow the grass to recover and prevent their animals from destroying the topsoil by trampling the same piece of land for too long.

What these Mongolian scholars are clearly trying to do in many of their publications is to defend their traditional ethnic culture and lifestyle, and convince officials as well as their Han Chinese colleagues that Mongolian herders should be allowed to stay on the grasslands and continue with their traditional lifestyle. The interesting point about this effort, however, is that it is not framed in the discourse of cultural rights but rather in an environmentalist, scientific framework. The argument, in other words, is that the traditional Mongolian lifestyle should be preserved not for its own sake but rather for the sake of protecting and saving the environment.

The critical ethno-environmental discourse used by Mongolian academicians not only challenges the narrative of overgrazing but also the governmental policies that were formulated on the basis of this narrative. The sharpest criticism is usually directed at the "household responsibility system." Many Mongolian scholars regard the privatization and fencing of the grasslands that took place as a result of the implementation of this system in Inner Mongolia as one of the main sources of the environmental crisis in the region (second only to land reclamation) because it ended the mobility of herders, which is so crucial in their eyes to the survival of the grasslands.[36]

A related criticism is that state environmental policies have also led to the impoverishment of Mongolian herders, causing many of them to migrate to towns and cities. A 2007 article by another prominent Mongolian scholar named Haishan, who is affiliated with Inner Mongolia Normal University in Hohhot, provides an excellent example of this criticism. In his article, which he dedicated to the problem of pauperization in Inner Mongolia's pastoral regions, Haishan cites unpleasant statistics about the extent of the poverty among Inner Mongolia's herders. He suggests that the problem of pauperization, which according to him has become universal in the region's pastoral areas, started in the mid-1990s. After identifying several factors contributing to the situation, the author explicitly links the pauperization of the herders to the "household responsibility system," and claims provocatively that, "[i]n 1983, when the 'household responsibility system' was introduced, the pastoral regions in Inner Mongolia didn't have any impoverished families." [37]

Haishan's criticism is not confined to the "household responsibility system"; it is also directed at later policies:

> From 2000 on … the strategy of "enclosing and sealing [of grazing land] and transfer [of herders]" (*weifeng zhuanyi* 围封转移) … and "the ban on grazing and the restoration of grass"

36 See, e.g., Zhang, Borjigin and Zhang 2007, 25.
37 Haishan 2007, 45.

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(*jinmu huancao* 禁牧还草)… not only did not restrain the deterioration of the grassland ecology, but directly exacerbated the pauperization of the herders.[38]

Haishan continues in the article with criticism of the state which he accuses of failing to protect the grassland and Mongolian herders from the harmful activities of people and organizations that do not necessarily represent state policies. He makes this accusation explicit in the statement below, where he goes beyond the issue of the herders' poverty to address their general rights, and also implies that the destruction of the grasslands and the disregard of the herders' rights violate Inner Mongolia's autonomy:

Although in 1984 and 1985 the state promulgated and implemented in succession the Law of Autonomy in Ethnic Regions, and the Grassland Law, it has never been able to effectively prevent all kinds of acts that destroy the grassland and violate the rights and interests of ethnic minority herders.[39]

The citations above show how Mongolian scholars have been challenging the notion that the government is the protector of the environment and the saviour of the herders. Contrary to this official rhetoric, these scholars have portrayed the government and its policies as the forces that are actually destroying the grassland and bringing calamity to its inhabitants.

The academic works of Mongolian scholars such as Dalintai and Haishan share much in common with the artistic works of Mongolian artists such as Teng Ge'er and Ning Cai. They may not be as powerful in terms of articulating and evoking sentiments such as empathy, anxiety and discontent, but they have nevertheless made an important contribution to the ethno-environmental discourse among Mongols by producing an entire body of alternative knowledge that challenges both official knowledge and the environmental policies that were formulated on the basis of that knowledge. Moreover, with their detailed and systematic analysis of facts and data that are often ignored by official sources, these works have also helped to question and subvert the scientific authority claimed by the state when justifying its policies. By doing so, they have validated popular doubts and suspicions about the government and its intentions.

Mongolian Ethno-environmentalism and Indignation in Daily Discourse and on the Internet

After decades during which many educated Mongols regarded *kaiken* as the "chief criminal of the destruction of the grassland,"[40] the discourse began to change. Indeed, since the coal rush that swept Inner Mongolia in the early and mid-2000s, coal mining and other heavy industries have started to replace *kaiken* as the ultimate target of Mongolian ethno-environmentalist criticism. The mining

38 Ibid., 48.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.

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industry has not only caused additional environmental damage but has also triggered a new wave of Han Chinese migration into the region and more aggressive seizures of grazing land from the herders, all adding to the indignation of Mongols. This situation prompted many to question the policies of the state and its intentions even further. Indeed, as more and more environmentally destructive coal mines and industrial plants appeared on the grassland, it became increasingly difficult to justify the ban on grazing and the eviction of hundreds of thousands of herders in the name of protecting the grassland. Many Mongols felt that Mongolian herders were discriminated against and were the only ones who were required to pay the price for Inner Mongolia's environmental protection and development, and some believed that the official environmental discourse was just a pretext to take over Mongolian land.

While Mongolian artists, writers and academics had to restrain their criticisms and outrage because of the institutionalized nature of their activities, in daily discourse and on the internet the voices of protest and indignation became increasingly militant as the first decade of the 2000s drew to a close. One representative example of this trend can be found in the talkback section of the internet version of an article that was published in a popular magazine on 5 May 2010. This article was dedicated to the "death of the Ulagai (*Wulagai* 乌拉盖)" and presented a critical description of the new dam that was constructed in 2004 in the upper reaches of the Ulagai river in Shilingol League in order to supply water to a nearby industrial zone. The article noted that the building of the dam led not only to the lower reaches of the river drying up but also to the desertification of a huge area of grassland and wetland that existed along the river basin. The piece prompted several angry talkbacks, one of which deserves special attention. Posted on 25 September 2010, just eight months before the eruption of the 2011 unrest, this talkback read: "The source of all evil is the system in which the grasslands are not mastered by the herders. In less than a few years' time all the people in the grassland will become Gadameilin 嘎达梅林 (in Mongolian, Gada Meiren)."[41]

Although it is impossible to verify the identity of the person who posted this talkback, which is one of the reasons for its boldness, the content of the response suggests that it was most likely written by a Mongol. Indeed, the most important thing about this post is the reference to Gada Meiren, a Mongol born in 1892 who, between 1929 and 1931, led an armed rebellion against the local authorities in the Horchin (Ke'erqin 科尔沁) grasslands in south-east Inner Mongolia. There are several versions of Gada Meiren's story, and his rebellion has been interpreted in various ways. The official interpretation suggests that it was a proto-revolutionary class struggle of herders against landowners combined with a struggle against the Nationalists and even against the Japanese. However, most Mongols remember Gada Meiren as a Mongolian hero who resisted the Han

41 Ge 2010.

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Chinese colonization of Inner Mongolia and who struggled against the sale of Mongolian grazing land to Han Chinese farmer-settlers.[42] Although it is unclear which specific interpretation the individual who posted the talkback had in mind, the post alludes to the threat that if the destruction of the grasslands in Inner Mongolia and the marginalization of herders continue, the herders will soon rise up in rebellion, just like Gada Meiren.

Another example of the militant discourse that developed among Mongols on the eve of the 2011 unrest can be found in an article that was published in the *South China Morning Post* on 14 October 2010. The article was dedicated to a Mongolian lama called Siendao from West Üjümchin Banner (*Xi Wuzhumuqin* 西乌珠穆沁), also in Shilingol League. Siendao was hailed as a local hero by herders because of his efforts to protect their interests and legal rights against the growing and often illegal pressure exerted by mining companies and government officials to give up their pasturelands. He was harassed by the local police and even arrested for a short period because of his activism. When asked by the reporter if he was afraid of further prosecution, the lama replied: "Inner Mongolia's grassland is suffering from the worst environmental rampage in history. Fear won't save us … The invaders charge like wolves when we're afraid but scatter like rats when we're angry. It's time to fight back."[43] In retrospect, it seems that this call to arms heralded the outbreak of the unrest that took place several months later, not far from Siendao's home.

The angry and militant discourse described above was also manifest during the 2011 protests themselves, as illustrated by a rap song that was uploaded to the internet on 29 May, six days after the first demonstration took place in Shilinhot. Dedicated to Mergen, the herder whose death triggered the demonstrations, and written and performed in Chinese by a Mongolian college student from the city of Tongliao 通辽 in eastern Inner Mongolia whose identity has not been revealed, the song was widely disseminated on the Chinese internet before it was removed by the censors several hours after it was posted.[44] Imbued with the anger and indignation that pushed thousands of Mongols on to the streets, the song calls Mergen "the son of the grassland," compares him to Gada Meiren, and depicts graphically how he was killed and how his death "caused all Mongols to feel a great sorrow" and "awakened" them. It then declares that all Mongols are united as one, and criticizes the unjust treatment and oppression that Mongols have been experiencing in China.[45]

However, prior to making these accusations, the song first poignantly criticizes the destruction of the grasslands, and thus provides more evidence about the key position that environmental issues held in the 2011 protests. This part of the song

42 Jankowiak 1993, 46; Bulag 2004, 102, 105; Baranovitch 2009, 190–93.
43 Chen 2010.
44 SMHRIC. 2011. "Rap song dedicated to Mergen banned," 13 June, http://www.smhric.org/news_390.htm. Accessed 23 May 2014. This source also contains the Chinese lyrics of the song, an English translation, and a link to the song's recording.
45 Ibid.

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depicts the desertification of the grasslands and calls the official narrative of overgrazing "a lie." It then spells out in detail the various factors that many Mongols consider to be the real cause of the destruction of the grasslands, including mining and the "plunder of resources," land reclamation for farming, and the building of dams to divert river water to development projects. This verse ends with a curse directed at the "open up the west" policy, which is obviously held responsible for much of the damage caused to the grasslands. The curse is followed by a statement that "the grassland is the mother of the Mongols," testifying once again to the symbolic importance of the grasslands. Although the song does not actually identify the Han Chinese by name, it nevertheless makes a clear distinction between "we" and "you." The fact that the "we" is explicitly identified as Mongols leaves no doubt as to who the "you" refers to in the song:

> Yo, I am a Mongol/ Although I rap in Chinese/ No matter what/ I am a Mongol/ Mongolian blood flows in my body/ The vast Mongolian territory is my home/ The blue Mongolian plateau has already turned yellow/ The beautiful grasslands will all turn into desert in the future/ Yet the government says this disaster is caused by the herders/ But have you ever thought about it?/ Whose fault is it actually?/ The lie of overgrazing is not true/ We have grazed animals on this piece of land for several thousand years/ Why has desertification started only in the last few decades?/ How many people are coming here to open up mines and plunder resources?/ How many people are coming here to farm and cultivate the grasslands?/ How many dams are robbing the water sources that maintain the grassland?/ How much river water is being used to water the farmland?/ Our home is being ruined like this/ So I say damn the "open up the west"/ You sacrifice the environment to develop the economy and you keep the money for yourself to spend/ With some of the money you hire dogs to oppress us/ Stop all the mining and industrial projects that destroy the ecological environment of the grassland/ The grassland is the mother of the Mongols/ It cannot endure the ravage … [46]

In the last two lines of the song, the singer/song writer provides another example of the deep anxiety felt among the Mongolian educated elite that Mongolian culture and identity are dying out. He claims proudly and militantly: "We will never be doomed/ We are the descendants of Chinggis Khan."[47]

Conclusion: The Ethnicization of the Environment and the Environmentalization of Ethnicity

This article has examined why and how environmental degradation became such a prominent theme during the protests that swept Inner Mongolia in 2011, and why and how this theme became so closely linked with Mongols. I have suggested that grassland degradation has had a devastating impact on the material condition of Mongolian herders, leading to their impoverishment and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of them. I have also suggested that the impact of grassland degradation has extended to the Mongolian educated elite, for whom both grassland degradation and the consequent plight of Mongolian herders have had important symbolic meanings that relate to their sense of ethnic identity and

46 Ibid. This translation is by the author.
47 Ibid.

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ethnic politics. I have proposed that these symbolic meanings have exacerbated the already deep anxiety among Mongolian intellectuals that Mongolian culture and identity are dying out. I have also showed how the Mongolian educated elite have created an environmental discourse that has completely ethnicized the environmental crisis in Inner Mongolia. Finally, I have maintained that this discourse, which attributes the destruction of the grasslands to the Han Chinese and the policies of the Chinese state while presenting the Mongols and their culture as the victims of these policies and as the only ones who can protect the grassland, constituted a major component of the complex context that led to the 2011 unrest.

The link that the Mongolian ethno-environmental discourse creates between Mongolian ethnicity and the environmental crisis in Inner Mongolia is not without ambiguity, and it has been interpreted and used in ways that may seem contradictory. On the one hand, the ethnicization of Inner Mongolia's environmental crisis suggests that the Mongolian educated elite still possess a strong ethno-nationalist consciousness and that they enlist environmentalism as yet another tool to maintain and strengthen their identity and mobilize their fellow Mongols to resist Han Chinese domination. At the same time, however, the examination of the many expressions of discontent that preceded the 2011 unrest has also revealed that parallel to ethnicizing Inner Mongolia's environmental crisis, Mongolian intellectuals have simultaneously environmentalized their ethnicity. Thus, the strong link that they have created between their ethnicity and environmentalism has also enabled them to present their ethnicity in softer, environmental terms, while playing down the harder and more challenging components of their ethno-nationalist identity.

I would argue that this environmentalization of ethnicity is a calculated strategy used by the Mongolian educated elite, and that the widespread use of this strategy before and during the 2011 unrest constitutes another important reason for the central position that environmental issues held during the protests. As I have shown throughout the article, while the Mongolian educated elite have been concerned about the condition of the grasslands, they have been equally concerned about the mass migration of Han Chinese to Inner Mongolia, the loss of Mongolian land to the Han Chinese and the Chinese state, the increasing intervention of the state in the lives of Mongols, and most importantly, the assimilation of Mongols into Chinese society and the loss of Mongolian traditional culture and identity. The Chinese state regards these concerns as illegitimate and associates them with Mongolian nationalism and separatism; however, in sharp contrast to all forms of ethnic protest, the state has repeatedly demonstrated a great deal of tolerance for the recent wave of environmental protests because it considers such protests apolitical. Thus, for many years now, and during the 2011 unrest as well, the Mongolian elite have appropriated the global environmental discourse to frame many of their ethno-nationalist aspirations and concerns within the legitimate framework of environmentalism. Adopting such a strategy

has legitimized their protests and reduced the chances of suppression. This strategy has also improved the odds of gaining support among government officials and the Han Chinese majority and of achieving some gains.[48]

As a result of this framing, the state not only responded positively to the protests but simultaneously enhanced the environmental framing to legitimize its own conciliatory approach as well as to neutralize the ethno-nationalist sting that was nevertheless embodied in the protests in spite of the dominant environmental rhetoric. Although heavy security measures were implemented during the unrest, officials were quick to acknowledge the grievances of the protesters, and the official media were quick to claim that their demands were "reasonable" and that the protest was not ethnic.[49] Moreover, as already noted, the state immediately declared that it would limit the activities of the coal mines and take measures to protect the grasslands. Such a positive response would not have been possible, certainly not after the 2008 and 2009 unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang, if the protesters had not framed their ethnic agenda within an environmentalist framework.

My article shows that the ethnicization of the environment and the environmentalization of ethnicity among Inner Mongolia's Mongols are interrelated processes that take place simultaneously. Furthermore, in contrast to some recent scholarship on Inner Mongolia,[50] I maintain that Mongolian environmental protest and Mongolian ethno-nationalism and struggles over sovereignty are not necessarily opposed to one another or mutually exclusive. The two processes also raise important questions regarding the state of Mongolian resistance. Clearly, the 2011 protests and the ethnicization of the environmental crisis by the Mongolian educated elite suggest that statements made in this recent scholarship about the Mongols' "lack of resistance" underestimate their will and ability to resist.[51] Yet, at the same time, if examined in a historical perspective, the fact that in their 2011 protests the Mongols chose to highlight environmental issues while downplaying the more politically sensitive elements of their discontent may indeed be interpreted as a sign of the weakening of their resistance. This possibility becomes clear if one compares the 2011 protests with the previous large-scale protests that took place in Inner Mongolia in 1981, during which protesters were much bolder and openly and explicitly demanded real autonomy and an end to Han migration.[52] An in-depth and more systematic comparison of the two protests certainly deserves a separate study.

48 For references to early manifestations of this strategy, see Williams 2002, 40; Bulag 2004, 101.
49 "Putting Mongolian protests into context," *Global Times*, 31 May 2011.
50 Han 2011b, especially 942–43, 2011a.
51 Han 2011a, 67.
52 Jankowiak 1988.

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摘要: 2011 年 5月内蒙古爆发近 30 年来最严重的民族抗议示威. 本文章分析引发这次骚动的重要原因, 尤其强调生态环境问题的影响. 文章解释环境问题在骚动中为什么占那么重要的位置, 并讨论环境问题和民族问题的关系. 在描述草原退化对蒙古族牧民的物质和实际影响以后, 我的主要焦点就是分析内蒙草原环境危机对蒙古族知识分子的象征性影响. 本文章提出蒙古族知识分子把环境问题, 民族政治和民族身份认同早已结合在一起. 笔者认为, 近 20 年来蒙古族知识分子制造了一种非常民族化的环境话语, 并这个话语在 2011 年的骚动中发挥了很重要的作用.

关键词: 内蒙古; 2011 年的抗议; 民族政治; 自然环境; 草原退化; 蒙古族牧民; 蒙古族知识分子

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